

Voces Novae

Volume 1

Article 11

2018

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Kyle Kordon
Chapman University

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Recommended Citation

Kordon, Kyle (2018) "Interview with Dr. Sergei Khrushchev, April 18, 2008," *Voces Novae*: Vol. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/vocesnovae/vol1/iss1/11>

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Voces Novae: Chapman University Historical Review, Vol 1, No 1 (2009)

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Interview with Dr. Sergei Khrushchev, April 18, 2008

Kyle Kordon

On April 18, 2008 I interviewed Dr. Sergei Khrushchev, the son of the late Soviet Premier, Nikita S. Khrushchev. The following is the transcript of that interview. This was the first of two interviews that I conducted with the younger Khrushchev at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. The topic of the interview was very broad. Its original purpose was for a research paper for a Russian History class that I took in the spring of 2008 at Chapman University, instructed by Dr. William Cumiford. My goal was to discuss as many topics as possible in order to gain some material for the foundation of the research paper. We discussed Khrushchev's 1959 visit to the United States, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the overthrow of Khrushchev, the rise of Brezhnev, what this usurpation of power did to the Soviet Union domestically, when and why the younger Khrushchev became an American citizen, the major issues that Khrushchev faced when he came to power, and his own suggestions as to where I might begin the research for my senior thesis. This interview was the catalyst for my senior undergraduate thesis that was completed in the spring of 2009.

Kyle Kordon: I have a number of questions to ask you, and we don't need to go through all of them if you don't want to.

S. Khrushchev: It's up to you, you had such a long flight that I don't feel that I can put any limitation on you or your questions.

Kordon: If any of these inspire you to talk about different things, feel free. Anything that you think would help me out with my project on your Father.

Kordon: When did you first come to the United States?

S. Khrushchev: I first came here with my father on his state visit in September 1959. Long ago.

Kordon: What was the nature of that trip?

S. Khrushchev: I was accompanying my father, he had an invitation by President Eisenhower. They had their negotiation at Camp David, but at that time these visits had a different nature, and a different purpose because it was the beginning of the mutual interaction of the two worlds. So it was important to present and to understand what it was. It was not only like now you come to the capital Moscow or Washington and leave in two days. We spent about two weeks traveling from the West Coast, to the center of America, and Pittsburgh.

Kordon: Was there anything that you found exceptionally interesting about that trip?

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S. Khrushchev: It was a different world. It was like the discovery America. It was like Columbus or anybody else. We were shocked by skyscrapers, the roads, and the cars. We expected these things, but everything was interesting. It was most interesting that America is not Manhattan. America is very different. It is individual homes, and very well developed infrastructure. My father had his friend Roswell Garst, a farmer in the corn production so he especially wanted to visit his farm.

Kordon: What year did you become a United States citizen?

S. Khrushchev: It was in 1999.

Kordon: What motivated you to move here and to become a citizen?

S. Khrushchev: After my difficulties with Brezhnev I was transferred to another research institute, I will not describe it, everything is in my book. And later they promoted me, and I was not very happy with it because I did not want to have to deal with the bureaucracy. Also I was working with my Father on his memoirs. When Brezhnev died - at that time they did not permit me to leave the country to travel - I was invited to Harvard for one week, and then I was there for one semester at the Kennedy school, and one of my friends brought me to Brown, and I spoke here at the Watson center. And Thomas Watson he hosted my Father on the West Coast at the computer factories. After that they invited me as a visiting fellow, and I was curious about what the American university was like. I did not have a clear understanding about what was Providence and Brown University. But I understood that it was in some part of the United States, so I agreed that I would come here for one year, and I arrived here in September 1991, just after the August coup in Moscow. A few months later the Soviet Union disappeared, and my computer institute also disintegrated. I found myself very comfortable here. At the time they people in the institute here were very interested in my writings. They were very friendly people - that is very important. I am not saying only at the University, but in the neighborhood, and I liked the climate here more than in Moscow. And then of course there was no way I could go back because there was no country, no institute. So I stayed here for some time, and in 1996 I told my wife that I did not think that we would return. Even though we have family there, and still have an apartment there. At the time we had our green cards, and I knew that if we wanted to live here we have to become citizens. We had to be responsible for living here. So we applied for citizenship. I did not expect all the loud fanfare that followed us. Americans think that they gained something through me, but it was pleasant. Immigration was a big decision. I came here, and rented my first apartment with two suitcases that was mostly full of my manuscripts. Year by year I've adjusted, and I like this country.

Kordon: Did any of your views on the United States change after you moved here?

S. Khrushchev: I do not want to say that it changed because I wouldn't say that I had real views on Americans because if you're talking about America as a superpower, and the motivation of the political leadership it did not change because we had the understanding of your national interests and your goals - that change from one administration to another. It does not change that they want to have the leading position in the world. But I was surprised to learn that Americans are much more friendly than Europeans. When you ask people in the States with a heavy foreign accent for help, they reach out and ask if they can help you further. That was very different, it definitely surprised us.

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Kordon: You mentioned that you traveled with your father a number of times. What other places have you traveled to?

S. Khrushchev: I would not say that I traveled with him a lot because he traveled like a political leader, and he went many places. He wanted to show me the world so he took me, not only on the foreign visits, but also when he visited other places in the Soviet Union. For the foreign countries I went with him to Great Britain in '56, and then here to the United States in '59, and in the 60's I traveled with him to South Asia in India, Burma, Indonesia, Afghanistan, then to France, and I was with him in GDR - East Germany - and Yugoslavia, and that's it. From one side it's a lot, but from others - if you were to mention all of his visits it might be less than 1%. But of course for someone who hasn't traveled it is a lot.

Kordon: Of the places you have visited, would you suggest any of them to someone who has never traveled outside the country, like me, that you found particularly interesting?

S. Khrushchev: Yeah, you have to travel to Indonesia. I like nature, and I collected butterflies, so Indonesia for me was like a tropical paradise. And as for Europe, you should visit France. It is the best part of Europe.

Kordon: As for your father, what were some of the major obstacles that he faced when he came to power?

S. Khrushchev: The biggest thing was to transform the Stalin tyranny into a normal country. It was not very difficult. He wanted to make the lives of the people more normal so he started to invest more in agriculture and housing because there was a strong food crisis and a housing crisis - a room sometimes held more than ten people in some cases, where people had to sleep on the floor. So he started to support agriculture, he lowered taxes on the farmers, he invested in new technology, and new houses began to come up very fast. He also turned the country from military production and heavy industry to more focused on consumer goods. After ten years of his reign the Soviets lived much better; for them the Khrushchev time was the best of the 20th century. I cannot say that it was good, but it was better. One sign of this is that the life expectation at the end of the Khrushchev reign was higher than in the United States. If we look at the beginning of the 20th century, the Americans were 15 years ahead of Russia. At the end of the 20th century they were also 15 years ahead of Russia. In 1964, Russia was ahead of the United States; not by much, but maybe by one or two years. It had the highest birth rate. He wanted to move from the Stalin tyranny and the secret police to a more democratic way. He started this, but was not able to finish it. He tried to impose term limits at the highest level in the party. This transition took a long time. If you're talking about the democracy this type of change would not happen overnight. The transition to democracy takes decades, and maybe more than a century until you change your preference to a constitutional form. The French transition began after their revolution in 1789, and only became a stable democracy after de Gaulle. So he made the first steps. Unfortunately his successor turned everything back to the tyranny like Stalin. There were many problems during the Brezhnev period. So through all of this, he changed the country.

Kordon: I've started your two biographies on your father recently. Are you planning any new works to be published on him in the near future?

S. Khrushchev: Yes. I will publish a new book. It is about the Khrushchev reforms. I have been working for the last eight years on this book, and I will finish it this summer. It might take a couple of years in the

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translation because it will be the same size as my second book *Nikita Khrushchev and the Creation of a Superpower*.

Kordon: One thing that I found interesting in *Khrushchev on Khrushchev* was that your father and President Kennedy discussed a joint mission to Mars.

S. Khrushchev: Yes, this was a Kennedy initiative. His motivation was understandable. He declared in 1961 that the Americans would go to the moon. In this book the editor made a mistake. He changed it from "moon" to "Mars," and I did not catch them. So they did not discuss anything about Mars. But at the meeting in Vienna, Kennedy mentioned an idea about a joint mission to the moon. And his motivation was if Russia will be first then that would be a huge blow to American pride. So better to go together then there will be no risk. And at that time my Father rejected this because he thought that Americans can discover, through this working together, how weak we are. But then in 1963, unofficially through the Ambassador, and in his speech in the United Nations, Kennedy asked Khrushchev again, and this time my Father could agree because we were stronger then. He feared, which you will find in my second book, that if Americans find how weak we are then we have to worry about a first strike. The Americans were very aggressive, and we feared that they would attack us at the first possibility. But this was the same feeling on both sides.

Kordon: What was life like for your Father on a daily basis outside his day-to-day obligations he had as a national leader?

S. Khrushchev: First of all you cannot separate a leader's personal and political life on a day-to-day basis because it's not like being a scientist where you can work at the office and then go home for the day and not think about work. But, first of all, he was a very predictable person. He had the perception of being pushy, but he never let his emotions affect his decision making. He had a good family life, he liked all of us children. It was a pleasant family life here. It was in the old-style. He had six children, and we all lived together in a state residence. He also liked nature, and gardening. He planted everywhere. Apple orchards, peaches. He had his own kitchen garden with tomatoes, corn, peas. He liked going searching for wild mushrooms in the forest. He liked hunting especially ducks, hares, sometimes deer and boars. He also liked having guests. He liked conversation, and enjoyed discussing different things. He liked music, especially classical music, and opera. Ballet was not his preference. He actually went to the theatre two or three times a week in Moscow. That was part of day-by-day life. He liked to take foreign visitors there with him. So he was always busy. You have to remember that he also had to go over the evening portion of his papers every day after dinner.

Kordon: After your Father came to power did you notice any significant changes in him?

S. Khrushchev: I would say no, because he was a member of the highest leadership since 1938, and then he moved to Moscow in '49 from Ukraine. So for him nothing changed except for he had more responsibility, but it was the same kind of responsibility. They did not change in the nature; they changed in the size. For example in the economy. He was in charge of the same things in Ukraine - 40 million people - and then in the Moscow region it was 20 million people, and then it changed to the whole Soviet Union which was 100 million people in 11 different time zones. But it was really the same. So there was no change in his behavior or his understanding. And for us we lived in the same apartment - which by American standards was modest.

Kordon: In *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, the "Cult of Khrushchev" was mentioned.

S. Khrushchev: In Russia there is some cliché, and Americans follow the same cliché. When my father decided to condemn the Stalin crimes it was named the "Cult of Personality." That meant nothing. Stalin created his tyranny, and he was a very effective public relations person - the same as Hitler - and he became like a God to the Soviet people. So they exposed him - that everybody regarded him as a great friend or as the Father of the Soviet people, the best friend of the children, the policemen. So when Khrushchev was ousted from power the Stalinists tried to blame him that he condemned the Cult of Personality of Stalin, and created his own cult. But it was very different because when Stalin created his cult no one was allowed to say anything bad about him or you would be thrown in prison. For Khrushchev it was very different because there was a difference between official praise and the kind of Cult of Personality of Stalin - whose tyranny was one of the worst in the world, comparable to Medieval times, and in the Middle East.

Kordon: In *Khrushchev on Khrushchev*, I read that a number of your Father's policies were passed after he was ousted.

S. Khrushchev: All of them were. He promoted the decentralization of the economy because he realized early that the centralized economy was not effective because of the bottleneck problem making all the decisions on the different items that you have to produce as well as managing where all of the money in the country goes. So he decided to regularize the economy first at the regional level and then give the decisions to the directors. But when Brezhnev came to power they moved back to the strong centralized form, and it led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev wanted to reduce military spending, and he tried to reduce the Soviet army to one-half a million. He did not achieve it, but reduced it from 4.5 million to 2.5 million, and he reduced the spending of the military. In the Brezhnev period they increased military spending and the military-industrial complex until it left the country bankrupt. Khrushchev also started the democratic reforms of Soviet society, and Brezhnev took it back to the old Stalinist form. So Khrushchev was a reformer, and Brezhnev led to the stagnation, and we can compare this to Imperial Russia, and Alexander II the reformer who boosted the country, and his successor Nicholas II rejected any reforms - no constitution. And if you do not reform when the country wants reforms then you will face revolution - which happened in 1917. After 20 years of the Brezhnev stagnation they faced the counter-revolution in 1991. All of the levels of society wanted overnight changes.

Kordon: Can you describe your initial impressions of Brezhnev as opposed to after your Father was ousted?

S. Khrushchev: He was not a strong leader. He liked to enjoy his power. He liked being the leader of a great power because that meant state visits and other things. He liked life, women, good style of living, a good drink - although he was not the same type of drinker that Yeltsin was. He liked expensive cars, and he had a big collection of cars. He liked decoration medals, so everyone gave him medals. At the end of his life he was like a Christmas tree. He did not change after my father except he had to prove to himself that he was right when he plotted against Khrushchev. Each time he had to prove himself that Khrushchev was wrong, and that he was right to plot against him. Through this he started to hate Khrushchev. Khrushchev became a "non-person." He was not mentioned anywhere, they did not say anything good or bad about him - he disappeared.

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Kordon: Do you feel that historians have done an adequate job assessing your Father?

S. Khrushchev: No, but that is my own opinion. I think that if they disagree with me then they should write their own book. I do not feel optimistic about Russian historians because they are returning to the same type of falsification as I studied when I was at school when I studied Russian and Soviet history, written by Stalin it was full of falsification. The same thing is happening in contemporary Russia. It is very hard to overcome your cliché sometimes. For example - talking about Cuban Missile Crisis, American cliché. Like in Superman movie - thinking that Khrushchev wants to change balance of power, that he thinks that Kennedy is weak, and that he can manipulate (Kennedy), to change the balance of power so he sends missiles to Cuba. Then Kennedy scared Khrushchev to leave, and that this caused him to be ousted. That has no real motivation of Khrushchev. Cuba for Khrushchev was the same as West Berlin. Even if it was a small piece of territory because it was part of your alliance, you had to risk the nuclear war to protect them. For Khrushchev it was not about the balance of power because of American superiority was so big that an additional 50 missiles did not change anything. It was a signal to not invade Cuba. Khrushchev did not think that it would bring such a reaction because he lived in Europe, and in Europe we had enemies at our gates all the time. So it was part of the difference in the mentality, and Americans felt safe because they are protected by two oceans. So they exaggerated. The first shock was Sputnik. There was this fear that "they have missiles and they will launch against us." The Cuban Missile Crisis was the same thing Khrushchev faced in Europe. Missiles at the gate, we have to take them out at all expenses. Cuban Missile Crisis was a psychological crisis, like a mob. They were willing to get the missiles out of Cuba at any expense - even risking the war. Nobody thought that there were the same missiles in Soviet territory. The only difference would have been about half an hour if they were launched from Siberia. If you want to take them out of Cuba, why not you care about Siberia? It is the motivation of the mob. You have something that is irrational. Here is the problem for the Americans and us. Khrushchev and Kennedy were not prepared for this. Because they were two very balanced leaders neither would shoot then think. They would think first and they decided not to shoot. It was a strong bargaining, and they achieved their goals. Americans never invaded Cuba, and Fidel Castro stayed in power. So Khrushchev reached his goal, and Kennedy reached his goal because Khrushchev no longer felt that he needed missiles there. Khrushchev reached his second goal, which was to be recognized as an equal - the Soviet Union. And of course Americans do not want to recognize anyone as equals. Khrushchev showed Americans that they were equals. We want to be recognized as equals. The Berlin Crisis, and the Middle East crisis were similar. It could have happened anywhere. Because the American newspapers scared people to death about Soviet missiles the crisis was a product of this hysteria. Because they were recognized as equals there was no world crisis. The Cuban missile crisis was the biggest event for America in the Cold War because of the mob mentality.

Kordon: Do you have any suggestions for secondary or primary sources that I could use for my thesis?

S. Khrushchev: Yeah, you could use the memoirs of my Father. I would say you could use this collection of objective documents, but they are in Russian.

Kordon: Yeah, unfortunately I do not know Russian yet.

S. Khrushchev: Yes, and it is unfortunate because these would be very useful. I will make a copy of this for you so if you have somebody to translate you can use it. Wait here, and I will make a copy for you. If you

will find somebody who can help you, some of these are in English, but I wrote it out in Russian. They are the memoirs of the different people about Khrushchev.

Kordon: Do you have any suggestion for a thesis topic?

S. Khrushchev: What I advise to my students is that you have to know what you want to say. What is your mission? What do you want to prove? You can try to prove something using as many sources as you can, only you want to discuss Khrushchev, his role in something. You cannot prove everything in one instance. You should say in the beginning what you are mostly focusing on. And of course you have to know what your conclusion will be - even though it sometimes changes. The most successful writers find what will their last sentence be - I do the same. Then you really know what you are saying.

Kordon: I think that that's about it as far as my questions go. Is there anything further that you'd like to say?

S. Khrushchev: Yeah, you should read my book. You have to know what you want to present in your book. When I wrote my book - the first one that you are reading - I wanted to discuss my Father's life after retirement. The second book I wanted to say that I worked with the military industrial complex, and I wanted to show how it made the country great. I wanted to make my point on transformation of Russia. In each book I asked different questions. I cannot answer if I do not know what you want to discuss in your book. You have to ask me a specific question so that you know what you want from me. So read my books and then either call me or you can visit me.

Kordon: Well, that about does it. Thank you so much for allowing me to come out here and interview you. It was a pleasure.

S. Khrushchev: No problem Kyle, thanks for coming out here, and good luck with everything. Feel free to let me know if you have more questions.

END OF INTERVIEW

